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MISTRAL'S "MEMOIRES."*

FIFTY-TWO years ago last May, seven young poets of Provence (Frédéric Mistral, Joseph Roumanille, Théodore Aubanel, Jean Brunet, Alphonse Tavan, Anselme Mathieu and Paul Giéra) dined together at Font-Ségugne in the château of Paul Giéra and founded a society, which they called Le Félibrige, for the rehabilitation as a literary language of Provençal, which had never ceased to be spoken by the common people.

In May, 1904, the semicentennial of this event was celebrated by a banquet of the Consistory of the Félibrige on the island of Bartelasse under the walls of Avignon and by anniversary exercises in the pine and oak grove surrounding this same château of Font-Ségugne. The two survivors of the original group, Mistral and Tavan, were present at both of these functions, and over both of these functions Mistral presided with a verve remarkable in a person of his years (then seventy-four). Those who were present were amazed as well by the physical endurance as by the mental alertness he displayed. The writer was privileged to see and hear him two months later on the occasion of the celebration of the sixth centenary of Petrarch at the fountain of Vaucluse, where he again filled to perfection the rôle of the young old man. The lyric fire of his improvisation on the immortal lovers, Petrarch and Laura, and the deathlessness of love left far behind the efforts of his fellow poets present, and is as unforgettable as Vaucluse itself.

The main facts of Mistral's career may be put into a single short paragraph. They are: taking the bachelor's degree at Nîmes; admission to the bar at Aix; renunciation of law for farming and literature; marriage with the girl who was to be later the first Queen of the Félibrige; the publication of his poems *Mirèio* (Mireille), *Calendau*, *Nerto*, *Pouèmo dóu Rose*, *Lis Isclo d'Or*, *La Rèino Jano*, and of a Dictionary of the Dialects of Southern France (*Lóu Trésor dóu Félibrige*); the representation of Mireille in the Arènes of Arles before 20,000 spectators, a representation accompanied by nearly three weeks of merry-making; the founding of the Museum of Arles (*Muséon Arlaten*) for Provençal antiquities; and the award to him (jointly with

* "*Mes Origines. Mémoires et Récits de Frédéric Mistral.*" Paris: Plon-Nourrit et Cie.

Echegaray) of a Nobel Prize, which he consecrated entirely to Provence.

The volume of Mistral memoirs, which has just appeared in Paris, closes with the year 1869, when his work in behalf of the *Langue d'Oc* had begun to bear fruit and his position as a poet was assured. It describes minutely the natural outdoor life he led as a child on his father's farm just outside the Provençal village of Maillane; gives his more striking experiences as a scholar in the village school, in the three boarding-schools to which he was sent successively, and in the Law School at Aix; explains the origin of his best-known poem, *Mireille*, and of the Society of the *Félibrige*; and narrates how—thanks to the shrewd and kindly interposition of Adolphe Dumas—*Mireille* was made to take Paris and France by storm.

As a youngster in dresses, Mistral's ruling passion was the yellow irises that grew in the water of a ditch into which he was so prone to tumble, when stretching and straining after the tempting flowers, that his mother forbade him to go near it. Vain prohibition! After two duckings, two complete changes of raiment and two spankings within half an hour (of a certain autumn day), his "hands still itched so to clutch some of these beautiful bouquets of gold," that he approached the ditch for a third effort and received a third ducking. This time, however, his good mother, instead of punishing him, clasped him to her bosom, dripping as he was, and burst into tears. "And thus," he says, "we wept together the whole length of the ditch. Once in the house, the saintly woman undressed me and wiped me dry with her apron; then, having made me swallow a tablespoonful of vermifuge, through fear my little system had received a shock, she tucked me into my crib, where, spent with weeping, after a little, I fell asleep.

"And what do you think I dreamed? Of my yellow irises, pardi! In a beautiful stream which wound about the farmhouse, limpid, transparent, azured, like the waters of the fountain of *Vaucluse*, I saw magnificent tufts of great green flags which flaunted in the air a veritable fairy kingdom of flowers of gold. Dragonflies with blue silk wings alighted on them, and I swam about nude in the laughing water. I seized the fair-haired *fleurs-de-lis* by handfuls, by double handfuls and by armfuls, but the faster I plucked the faster they grew.

"All at once, I hear a voice calling me, 'Frédéric!'

"I wake, and what do I see! A great armful of gold-colored irises illuminating my crib.

"The patriarch himself, the Master, my knightly father, had picked for me the flowers I coveted; and the Mistress, my sweet mother, had put them on my bed."

Frédéric, the village schoolboy, was an incorrigible truant, and for that reason he was put into a boarding-school at ten. At twelve, while at his second boarding-school, he had his first affair of the heart. His sweetheart "bore the name of Praxède, and she had upon her cheeks two vermilion flowers, like two roses freshly blown."

When Frédéric went, at seventeen, to Nîmes—where he did not know a soul—to be examined for his bachelor's degree, he was so overcome by lonesomeness and timidity in his strange surroundings that he took refuge in a lowly tavern frequented by teamsters. He was quickly on terms of cordiality with these simple people who spoke his beloved Provençal; and as soon as he got the news that he had passed his examinations with honor, he celebrated his success by drinking with them the wine of the region, and dancing with them the farandole.

Mistral's happiest hours, as a young man, were those he spent with his brother Félibres "practising '*le gai-savoir*,'" and those he spent in the company of peasants, boatmen and the laboring-men of the towns, whom he generously calls his poetical collaborators. He and his fellow apostles of "*le gai-savoir*" tramped up and down and across Provence "instilling '*le gai-savoir*' into the hearts of the people." On these excursions, Alphonse Daudet was often of the band. "At that time," says Mistral, "the future chronicler of the Prodigious Adventures of Tartarin of Tarascon was a roistering blade who did not let the wind get ahead of him. Audacious Bohemian, frank and free of speech, impatient to know everything, keen for every adventure, he was ready to plunge wherever there was life, light and the sound of joy. He had, as the saying is, quicksilver in his veins. . . .

"One day, in September, I received at Maillane a little letter from camarade Daudet—one of those letters, dainty as a parsley leaf, familiar to his friends—in which he said:

"MY FREDERIC,—To-morrow, Wednesday, I set out from Fontvieille to meet you at Saint-Gabriel. Mathieu and Grivolais will join us by way

of Tarascon. The rendezvous is at the buvette, where we shall look for you between nine and half past. After we have drunk a glass together at the wine-shop of Sarrasine, the beautiful hostess of the quarter, we will start on foot for Arles. Fail not!

‘Your

RED RIDING-HOOD.’

“On the appointed day, between eight and nine o’clock, we were all at Saint-Gabriel, below the chapel which watches over the mountain. At Sarrasine’s, we munched some brandied cherries, and—all aboard for the white road!”

At Arles, the party scraped acquaintance with an old river captain, named Gafet, who conducted them across the Rhône to a tavern frequented by boatmen, where they found such royal cheer that when they left, some hours later, they were primed for any and every exploit.

Now let Mistral speak:

“We had reached the steps of the Trinquetaille bridge:

“‘What do you say to dancing a bit of a farandole on the bridge?’ exclaimed the indefatigable and charming author of *La Mule du Pape*, ‘that is what the bridges of Provence were made for.’

“And off we go! dancing and singing across the bridge in the limpid light of the September moon which was admiring itself in the water. . . .

“All of a sudden—we were half-way across the bridge—we see emerging from the shadow ahead of us a band of delicious Arlésiennes, each with her Arlésien. They advance slowly, laughing and babbling. The rustle of the girls’ silk skirts and the soft cooing of the couples combined with the peacefulness of the night and the gentle swish of the Rhône, as it glided between the boats, to produce a most suave effect.

“‘A wedding!’ ejaculated the big captain, Gafet, who was still with us.

“‘A wedding?’ cries Daudet—who, by reason of his short sight, is uncertain as to what is approaching—‘An Arlesian wedding! A wedding in the moonlight! A wedding in the middle of the Rhône!’

“And, seized by one of his sudden caprices, our hare-brained companion flies ahead like an arrow, falls on the neck of the bride and smothers her with kisses.

“Aïe! What an imbroglio, *mon Dieu!* If ever we were near the water it was then. Twenty strapping fellows with raised fists surround us and hustle us.

“‘To the river with the villains!’

“‘How is this? What’s the matter? What does all this mean?’ shouted the captain, Gafet, forcing back the crowd. ‘Don’t you see that we have just been drinking, drinking at Trinquetaille to the health of the bride, and that it wouldn’t be good for us to drink more?’

“‘*Vivent les mariés!*’ we shouted all together.

"And thus, thanks to the fist and the wit of this good Gafet, whom everybody knew, the affair stopped there."

After recounting the further roamings of the hilarious band, Mistral concludes:

"And people dare tell me that Daudet was not a good Provençal? Because, a railler by nature, he attached the bell of the clown to the Tartarins, to the Roumestans, to the Tante Portals and to all the imbeciles of Provence who want to Frenchify the Provençal speech, shall Tarascon bear him ill-will?

"No! The mother lion will never lay it up against her whelp that, in frolicking, he touses her."

The above brief and broken citations give but a vague idea of the charm of Mistral's volume of memories. It contains a number of short stories that are destined to become classics. It has added a full half-dozen immortal characters to literature. It is tender, pathetic, picturesque, idyllic, whimsical and fantastic. Above all, it is blessed with the rollicking and extravagant humor of Rabelais's Gargantua and Pantagruel (minus the coarseness) and of Daudet's *Tartarin de Tarascon*. As a mere exhibition of animal spirits it is superb. It is not a big-bow-wow, "I-am-Sir-Oracle" autobiography. Its appeal is universal. It can and will be read and relished by persons who have never in their lives before heard of Mistral or of the Provençal Renaissance.

ALVAN F. SANBORN.